

The Rise and Fall of a Party: The Cuban CP (1925-59)

By Boris Goldenberg

Perhaps no political party in modern history has been propelled along such curious paths by what Hegel termed the “cunning of Reason” as has the Communist Party of Cuba. Brought into being in 1925 through the amalgamation of various small Communist groupings, it remained a powerless sect for a number of years until, in one of the biggest popular revolutions of recent Latin American history (1929–34), it acquired an important but ambivalent role that was to have a profound effect on its future development. To be more specific, the party adhered to an “ultra-leftist” line that earned it the hostility of the very forces which, from its own perspective, it should have recognized as representative of the progressive, anti-imperialistic “national bourgeoisie”—and hence

as its natural, if only temporary, allies. Consequently failing to form a popular front with these forces, the party—in its opportunistic quest for power—allied itself from 1937 to 1944 with Fulgencio Batista, the army “strong man” whom it had denounced only a short while before as a fascist counterrevolutionary. Under Batista’s patronage, what had hitherto been a small sect of revolutionaries developed into a sizable workers’ party operating within the framework of the Cuban political “establishment.” During the World War II period of Soviet-Western alliance, the party followed in the footsteps of the North American Communist “revisionist,” Earl Browder, and pursued a pro-democratic and pro-US policy, becoming the first Communist Party in Latin America to hold ministerial posts in a national government.

Following the defeat of the Batista coalition in the elections of 1944, the Communists sought to maintain their position of power by entering into collaboration with the victorious *Autentico* party, which they had formerly attacked as pro-fascist. This alliance of convenience lasted only until 1947, by which time the *Autenticos* no longer needed the Communists and the latter were already shifting to a Cold War line. Now, however, because of their own past record of opportunistic collaboration with whatever regime was in power, the Communists found themselves incapable of capitalizing on the widespread popular disenchant-

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ment—even in *Autentico* ranks—brought about by the corruption and mismanagement of the regime. At the same time, the bureaucratization of the party during the years of its collaboration in the government had diminished its capability to engage in effective underground activity. This became manifest in 1953 when Batista, after recapturing power by means of a *coup d'état*, turned against his former collaborators and outlawed the party. Having cut itself off to a large extent from the anti-Batista forces by virtue of its past policies, the party fell back into political isolation and turned once more into an ineffectual sect, even though the repressive measures taken by the Batista dictatorship were directed more against other opposition elements than against the Communists.

When, eventually, Cuba's disaffected intellectual youth, supported by large segments of the bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeoisie, launched the terrorist campaign against Batista that was the prelude to Fidel Castro's guerrilla war in the Cuban mountains, the Communists denounced the young rebels as "petty-bourgeois putschists." Taking the position that the dictatorship could not be overthrown by revolutionary struggle, they continued until 1958 to advocate the formation of a united front of all anti-Batista forces as a prerequisite for effective political action and did not even establish contact with Castro until a few months before his victory. As a consequence, Cuba's "old" Communists were outflanked "from the left" by a charismatic leader who came down from the mountains, and the first Communist revolution—albeit of a unique type—to succeed on Latin American soil was achieved without, and in part against, them.

This tragicomedy was followed by a no less remarkable epilogue. When the Communist Party terminated its 36 years of independent existence in 1961 to merge with the Castroites in a united party of socialist revolution then in the process of formation, it did so with high hopes that it would be able to dominate the new party. These hopes were soon dashed. Cuba's new dictator proceeded to confine the activities of the "old" Communists within narrow limits and, in 1962, brought them firmly under his control, stripping them of all actual power.

Prelude to Revolution

As what Marxists would term a "semi-colony" of its huge North American neighbor, the United States, Cuba in the 1920's exhibited conditions that seemed to make it fertile ground for the implantation and growth of revolutionary ideas. Key positions in the Cuban economy had passed into the hands of North American interests. The country, with its narrow economic base (sugar and tobacco), exported its products chiefly to the United States, which in turn supplied most of Cuba's imports. Moreover, with

the bulk of its small 3.5-million population poor, the industrially advanced United States just next door, and free-trade concepts predominating, there was little chance for the development of domestic industry producing for the domestic market, or for the growth of a real bourgeois class. Conditions were also unfavorable for the emergence of a productive middle stratum. A growing number of university graduates—roughly 30 percent of them in law and 40 percent in medicine, as against only 8 percent in science, engineering, agriculture and veterinary medicine—constituted an intellectual semi-proletariat who saw their best chances of social and professional advancement in acquiring government jobs. The university diploma became the admission ticket to the comfortable world of government sinecures, politics the most important "industry," corruption a necessity of life, and the state lottery the prime dispenser of hope for the common people.

The fact that Cuba's fate depended so heavily on factors beyond its control—particularly, on the quantity and price of sugar required by the world market, which were subject to sharp fluctuations—precluded any "planning," fostered irrationality, parasitic tendencies, and the "lottery mentality" of a society intrinsically deficient in entrepreneurs.

The lower stratum was just as heterogeneous as the "middle class" of shopkeepers, artisans, petty officials, tenant farmers, and members—often without employment—of the "free professions." In the rural districts, laborers working on the sugar plantations greatly outnumbered farmers of all categories. A great number were seasonal workers employed only during the harvesting of the cane, some of them finding similar temporary jobs during the coffee harvesting season which followed. The workers employed by the railroads and a few US-owned urban industrial enterprises constituted a sort of small labor aristocracy. On the other hand, the employees of the smaller urban enterprises, the vast number of domestic workers, and the "reserve army" of unemployed were much worse off. Superimposed upon these differences were conflicts between "natives" and foreigners (including Spaniards, Haitians, and laborers imported from Jamaica) and between whites and blacks. It is consequently not surprising that the labor unions, which long remained without official recognition, were weak, limited to the large urban centers, and filled with conflicting currents of anarcho-syndicalism and reformism. It is no less surprising that "anti-imperialism" was widespread and deep-rooted not only among the intellectuals and segments of the middle class and labor, but also—and not least—among the *políticos*, who found the neighbor to the north an ideal whipping-boy for their own ineffectuality, and who also tended to view US influence as a threat to their own vested interest in corruption.

From 1921 through 1924, the presidency was held by Alfredo Zayas, under whose leadership all previous

records for corruption were surpassed. At the same time, his regime sought to maintain a maximum of freedom, which however took on chaotic forms and gave rise to acts of terrorism and violence by anarcho-syndicalists and other radical elements.¹ At the end of 1924, the liberal politician and former general, Gerardo Machado, was overwhelmingly elected to succeed Zayas on a platform pledging to restore order and put an end to financial corruption and mismanagement. During its first years in office, Machado's regime gained wide popularity. The economic situation improved; new protective tariffs benefited domestic industry; and a large public works program reduced the number of unemployed, winning the President a following among the lower social strata as well.

After 1928, however, the political situation changed drastically. Although the Cuban constitution prohibited a president from serving two consecutive terms, Machado in 1928 got the relevant provisions of the constitution amended and won reelection to a second term—now extended by the amendments to six years instead of four. The workers and peasants, as well as a large section of the upper strata, accepted this docilely enough, but a ferment of opposition began among the petty bourgeoisie and especially among the intellectuals. Both conservative and liberal as well as more or less radical-democratic politicians began forming underground organizations to agitate against the dictatorship. Anti-Machado demonstrations took place at the University of Havana, and the first revolutionary “student directorate” was formed.

Just as this ferment was getting under way, the worldwide depression hit Cuba in 1929–30. The sugar harvest dropped from five million tons in 1929 to less than two million tons in 1933, and the price of sugar from 1.8 to 0.57 cents a pound, causing the total value of the sugar harvested to shrink from \$200 million in 1929 to \$42 million in 1932. There was a similarly sharp decline in tobacco sales, and the crisis in these two key industries spread to all sectors of the economy. Many medium and small businesses closed their doors. Unemployment assumed gigantic proportions. When desperate workers began striking, Machado replied with repressive action which created the possibility of a united front of the lower and middle strata.

The first revolutionary mass strike broke out in March 1930. At Havana University, a new student directorate was formed, its members including Carlos Prio Socarras, Raul Roa, Eduardo Chibas, and Aureliano Sanchez Arango. There were demonstrations and riots, and government troops occupied and closed the university. In 1931, the “nationalist” followers of Car-

los Mendieta, together with other groups, attempted an uprising, but the revolt was crushed. An attempted “intervention” by revolutionaries based abroad also failed. The terrorist ABC organization, whose members were recruited mainly from among the intellectuals, launched its activities. Thus began the revolution that was to bring about the overthrow of the Machado dictatorship in the summer of 1933.

The Birth of Cuban Communism

The first Communist groupings in Cuba came from the ranks of the Socialist Workers' Party, which had been formed in 1905 and belonged to the Socialist International. The party had vegetated for years, and its most activist members had come under the sway of Bolshevik ideas. In 1923, the septuagenarian Carlos Baliño, a former follower of Cuban freedom fighter Jose Marti (killed in battle in 1895) and a co-founder of the Socialist Workers' Party, labor leaders Alejandro Barreiro, Jose Peña Vilaboa, Jose Rego, and Joaquin Valdes, and educator Jose Miguel Perez joined in forming the *Agrupacion Comunista de la Habana*.²

About a year after its founding, the *Agrupacion Comunista* admitted a new member who was destined to play a key role in the formative years of Cuban communism—the student leader Julio Antonio Mella. Mella was then only 21 years old but was already known in intellectual circles as an active anti-imperialist and revolutionary. He had been the chairman of a student congress in Havana which had called for university reform, struggle against imperialism, and the founding of a people's university to be named after Jose Marti.

The *Agrupacion Comunista* soon established contact with the Communist Party of Mexico,³ and an emissary of the latter came to Cuba to help weld the various small Communist groups into a regular party. This emissary was Enrique Flores Magon, son of a family which had played a role of some importance in the early stages of the Mexican revolution. The founding party congress convened in mid-August of 1925 in the Vedado section of Havana. It was announced at the congress that the party had some 80 members, but only a fraction of these were present. One of the founders—a Polish-born Communist who then called himself Yunger Semchowitz but later took the name

¹ See Felipe Zapata, “Esquema y Notas para una historia de la organizacion obrera en Cuba,” *Unidad Castronica* (Havana), September 1948, p. 29.

² Interview with Jose Rego Lopez by Jose L. Padron, *Revolucion* (Havana), Aug. 16, 1963. It is noteworthy that unidentified Cuban “Communist groups” had been invited to the Third World Congress of the Comintern in 1921 but had sent no delegates (see *Protocol of the Third Congress of the Communist International*, Hamburg, 1921, p. 13).

³ See Pedro Serviat, *40 Aniversario de la Fundacion del Partido Comunista*, Havana, 1963, p. 104.

of Fabio Grobart ⁴ —wrote fifteen years later of this meeting:

How small and insignificant that party congress appeared! . . . The largest of the amalgamated organizations, the *Agrupacion Comunista*, had a total of 27 members. . . . Just ten comrades took part in the congress.⁵

Perhaps the writer's memory was faulty, because other sources claim that 13 delegates and five others attended the proceedings.⁶

The congress expressed special thanks not only to the Mexican party but also to the three-member delegation of the "Hebrew section" of the Havana Communist group and its "youth section," of whom Semchowitz (Grobart) was one.⁷ The collaboration of the "Hebrew comrades" in the newborn Cuban party was especially important because of their knowledge of the German and Russian languages and their familiarity with the works of Marx and Engels, whereas most of the Cuban members were "Communists of the heart" with only the vaguest notions of Marxist theory.⁸

How little most of the participants knew of Comintern principles and practices was evidenced by questions put to Flores Magon by Mella regarding the nature of a "party cell" and of "democratic centralism," and by Mella's resolute opposition to any participation in general elections. It was only with the greatest effort that Flores Magon and the "Hebrew" comrades managed to gain acceptance of their views over Mella's "ultra-leftist" notions.⁹ A typical young *caudillo*, Mella showed little inclination to submit to any kind of collective discipline. After being arrested

in November 1925, he engaged in a hunger strike on his own initiative, and several former Communist sources have claimed that because of this he was expelled from the Cuban party and only readmitted through the intervention of the Comintern.¹⁰

The founding party congress elected a Central Committee of nine members (five of them workers), with Jose Miguel Perez named secretary-general. The entire leadership, however, soon fell victim to official persecution. Perez was arrested only a few days after his election and, because of his Spanish nationality, was deported. Mella, as already mentioned, was arrested in November. The elderly Carlos Baliño died in the early part of 1926. Peña Vilaboa, who assumed the post of secretary-general in place of Perez, was incapacitated by illness and seems to have been succeeded by Joaquin Valdes, who in turn was soon forced into exile.¹¹ Several of the founding members preferred to withdraw into private life. The party found itself—in the words of Fabio Grobart ¹²—"in effect, without leadership and organization. It had to start all over again. . . ."

The man who was to give the party a fresh start was Ruben Martinez Villena, a distinguished intellectual, poet and lawyer, who had befriended Mella and acted as his attorney. Influenced in no small measure by Grobart,¹³ this ardent romantic embraced Marxism-Leninism and joined the party in 1927. Though already suffering from incurable tuberculosis, he threw himself into party work with unbounded enthusiasm, becoming especially active in the then still small Cuban National Confederation of Labor

⁴ Born around 1900, Grobart is reported to have been a member of the Polish Communist Party before emigrating to Cuba in 1922 under the name of Abraham Simkowitz. (See Boris Kozolvhyk, *The Political Biographies of Three Castro Officials*, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, RM 4994 Re, May 1966.) His mother tongue was Yiddish, and since he had not yet learned Spanish, he had to rely on an interpreter named Vaserman at the founding congress. Though it has been claimed that Grobart was an "agent of the Comintern," this appears to be without substantiation. According to Pedro Serviat (see footnote 3), Grobart was not elected a full member of the Central Committee, but only as an alternate; however, he subsequently acquired an important behind-the-scenes role in the party, if for no other reason than the fact that so many of the other founding members fell victim to official persecution. Grobart himself was deported from Cuba in 1932 but returned the following year. After another trip abroad at the end of the 1940's, he again returned to Cuba to become the first editor of the newly-established theoretical review *Cuba Socialista* in September 1951. Castro, in his speech in Havana on October 4, 1960, introducing the members of the newly-established Central Committee of the United Party of the Socialist Revolution, described Fabio Grobart as "the founder of the first [Cuban] Communist Party."

⁵ Fabio Grobart, *15 años de lucha*, 1940, p. 3.

⁶ Serviat, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

⁷ Serviat, *op. cit.*, pp. 109-10.

⁸ Fabio Grobart, in *El Mundo*, Aug. 18, 1965.

⁹ Serviat, *op. cit.*, pp. 110 ff.

¹⁰ After his release, Mella went to Mexico, where he formed a Cuban émigré organization and was later elected to the Central Committee of the Mexican Communist Party. In 1927, he traveled to Europe and attended the Congress Against Colonial Oppression and Imperialism as a "delegate" of the Anti-Imperialist League of the Americas and other Latin American organizations (see *Die Flammenzeichen vom Palais Egmont* [Proceedings of the Congress Against Colonial Oppression and Imperialism], Berlin, 1927). Following a brief visit to Moscow, he returned to Mexico and, according to unconfirmed reports, served for a time as secretary-general of the Mexican party until he was reportedly ousted from this position and from the party in late 1928 by a "right-wing faction" headed by A. Stirner (Edgar Woog). A few weeks thereafter, he was readmitted to the party, only to be assassinated a few days later (January 10, 1929) on a public street by Mexican agents of Machado. The claim that he was actually murdered by a Comintern agent named Contreras (Vittorio Vidali) lacks credibility.

¹¹ Although the author has been unable to confirm definitely Valdes' occupancy of the post of secretary-general, there is no question that he played a leading role in the young party for a time. As Dr. Filomeno Rodriguez Abassal, an "old" Communist, observed in 1964, "he has been undeservedly forgotten" ("El caso Soler," in *Bohemia* [Havana], April 24, 1964).

¹² "Recuerdos sobre Ruben," in *Hoy* (Havana), Jan. 16, 1964.

¹³ Julian Ordoqui, in an interview with Nicolas Guillen (*Hoy*, Aug. 14, 1960) recalled that all the Communist leaders of that time, including Martinez Villena, "were helped by Fabio in our development, because he was the most politically advanced of the comrades."

(CNOC), initially dominated by anarcho-syndicalists.¹⁴ Besides acting as legal counselor to the workers, he framed programs and manifestos, helped organize strikes, and defended unionists on trial. It was in substantial part due to his efforts that several anarcho-syndicalists became converts to communism and that a number of Communist Party members (e.g., Cesar Vilar, Alejandro Barreiro, and Sandalio Junco) moved into leading union positions—although this latter process was also facilitated by the fact that the Machado regime engineered the assassination of known anarcho-syndicalist leaders and drove others into exile.¹⁵

In early 1930, the CNOC was outlawed after it called a mass strike reportedly joined by 200,000 workers. When the strike collapsed under the blows of the government, the Communists issued a totally irrational call for an “unlimited general strike,” which could not, however, be carried into effect. Sought by the police, Martinez Villena hid out successfully in the capital for a while and then managed to escape abroad, going to the Soviet Union, where he had to undergo medical treatment. Against the advice of physicians, he returned to Cuba at the end of 1932 in order to lead the Communist Party during the decisive phase of the anti-Machado revolution. Mortally ill, he was at last forced to abandon all work in late 1933 and entered a sanitarium where he died on January 16, 1934. Although he had been the real leader of the party between 1927 and 1930, and again in 1933, he had always declined the post of secretary-general.¹⁶ After Valdes, this post appears to have been held successively by Dr. Jorge Vivo (who then emigrated to Mexico), by Jose Antonio Guerra, and by the black physician and apostle of “Negro nationalism,” Dr. Martin Castellanos. Finally, in 1934, a former shoemaker by the name of Francisco Calderio from the east Cuban city of Manzanilla, evidently a protégé of Grobart, assumed the office of secretary-general and from then on, under the name of Blas Roca, led the party until its dissolution.

Attempts to Bolshevize the Party

Materials issued by the Executive Committee of the Comintern in preparation for the Seventh World

Congress described the Communist Party of Cuba prior to 1930 as “a small sectarian group of no more than 250 to 300 members and having little connection with the masses.” Nor did the Communist-inspired mass strike of March 1930 apparently alter the Comintern’s low estimate of the party’s effectiveness because the same materials went on to state that “a genuine changeover to working with the masses took place only in 1932, when the party extended its activity to the sugar workers.”¹⁷

The Comintern thus took a manifestly critical view of its Cuban section—and not without reason from its own viewpoint. Mella, Martinez Villena, and their closest Cuban-born comrades-in-arms were certainly revolutionaries, but just as certainly they were not Bolsheviks. Rather they were Communists of the heart, idealists, individualists, radical democrats, nationalists and anti-imperialists, regarding themselves as the most radical participants in the movement against Machado. While most of their proletarian fellow-combatants remained profoundly influenced by anarcho-syndicalism, these intellectuals were impatient voluntarists rooted in the Hispanic tradition and more inclined towards individual heroism than towards discipline. They had neither the time nor the desire to devote themselves to any serious study of Marxism-Leninism. Nothing was more alien to their make-up than calm analysis of the situation, cold calculation, or bureaucratism.

Small wonder, then, that the slogans employed by the Cuban Communists in that period had little in common with the current Comintern advocacy of class struggle. The Cuban party’s struggle was directed much more towards achieving freedom and democracy for the Cuban people than towards realizing any “immediate material demands of the workers.” The influence exercised by its leaders flowed from their personal dedication and not from organization. No “illegal apparatus” existed any more than did factory cells; membership fluctuated, and dues were paid only fitfully. It was therefore essential—in the eyes of the Comintern—that the Cuban party be bolshevized.

The Comintern view was set forth in a long and critical letter addressed to the Cuban party by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the United States in late 1930.¹⁸ In brief summary, the letter ran as follows: The Cuban party was far removed from bolshevism, was lagging behind develop-

¹⁴ The CNOC was organized in August 1925 and claimed to embrace 200,000 workers—a figure which Grobart has termed greatly exaggerated. Its relative weakness compared to the larger reformist and non-political labor federations was, in fact, one of the reasons why it was allowed to operate for a while and was not officially proscribed until 1930. See Fabio Grobart, “El movimiento obrero cubano de 1925 a 1933,” in *Cuba Socialista* (Havana), August 1966.

¹⁵ The Machado regime’s suppression of the anarcho-syndicalists certainly helped the Communists to extend their leadership

over the more militant segments of the Cuban labor movement, but it also benefited the moderate, reformist elements, whose leader, Juan Arevalo, organized the Cuban Federation of Labor. See Calixto Maso, “El movimiento obrero cubano,” in *Panoramas* (Mexico City), March–June 1964.

¹⁶ Grobart, “Recuerdos sobre Ruben,” *loc. cit. supra*.
¹⁷ *The Communist International before the Seventh World Congress: Materials*, Moscow-Leningrad, 1935, p. 494.

¹⁸ Published in *The Communist* (official organ of the CPUSA), Vol. X, No. 1, January 1931.

ments and therefore incapable of leading the growing revolutionary movement. Its main weakness lay in proclaiming abstract political slogans instead of concrete, everyday proletarian demands. This tendency had been evidenced during the strike of March 1930, which the Cuban party had conducted under the slogans of legalization of the labor unions, restoration of democratic liberties, and the overthrow of the Machado dictatorship—a line which blurred the distinction between the Communists and the bourgeois opponents of Machado. In addition to such “rightist” deviations, the letter also charged the Cuban party with deviations to the “left.” Specifically, its attempt to proclaim an “unlimited general strike” was called meaningless and dangerous because it had been tantamount to a *de facto* call for revolution in the absence of prior preparations. Such leftist blunders, said the letter, had tended to isolate the Communists from the masses and to strengthen “the position of the social-fascist [sic] union leaders.”

In response to this letter and directives from the Caribbean Bureau of the Comintern, the Cuban party in November 1930 executed a shift in policy, accompanied by a “purge” in which several prominent members, including Sandalio Junco,¹⁹ were expelled from the party. Some six months later, a lengthy article by a Cuban Communist author, published in the official monthly of the CPUSA, reported on the effects of these changes and the general situation in the party.²⁰ While claiming that the changes had already produced positive results—i.e., a rise in party membership from 300 to 500 and an improvement in work methods—the article acknowledged that the party was “still seriously hampered by strong remnants of petty-bourgeois reformism and of radicalism, as well as by organizational shortcomings.” On the latter count, the author noted that a disproportionately small percentage of the party’s members were employed in key economic sectors, that a similarly small percentage of the mem-

bers were native-born, and finally, that there were very few Negro members; moreover, the party still had no factory cells, no fully-developed program of action, and no press organs. As a result of these weaknesses, the article concluded, the bourgeois “nationalist” opponents of Machado were leading the masses and seemed to be the only force fighting the dictatorship.

In the spring of 1933, shortly after returning to Cuba from the USSR, Martinez Villena was able to portray the situation of the party in a much more favorable light. In an article for the CPUSA’s monthly organ,²¹ he reported a number of Communist successes: A sugar workers’ union affiliated with the CNOC had at last been organized at the end of 1932. The Communist Party had won *de facto* “semi-legal” status because of the authorities’ inability to suppress its activity. Strikes and revolts had already taken place in rural areas. Armed workers’ militia units had been organized in Central Cuba, and party membership in the province of Santa Clara had multiplied sixfold within a few months. The red hammer-and-sickle flag had been hoisted over several sugar mills. The morale of the government army was crumbling, and in many places its soldiers were refusing to resist the workers. The revolution was fast ripening.

Indeed, Cuba already found itself immersed in an acute revolutionary situation. Unrest was growing in both urban and rural areas, terroristic acts by the ABC organization were on the increase, and the majority of the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois strata were showing their hostility to the dictator more and more openly. In May 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt sent Sumner Welles to Cuba as US ambassador with instructions to mediate between the Machado government and the opposition and, if necessary, to induce Machado to resign. A time of testing for the Communists was at hand.

At the end of July, a strike of bus company workers, initiated by the CNOC, began in the Cuban capital. The strike quickly grew in size and spread to other cities as well as to the rural areas, embracing not only workers but salaried employees, government officials, teachers, lawyers, doctors and merchants. Virtually the entire people stormily demanded Machado’s resignation.

On August 3, the Communist Party issued a manifesto. In keeping with the party’s new line, the manifesto put concrete economic demands in the foreground—an eight-hour workday in industry and commerce; payment of all back wages; measures to relieve

¹⁹ A Negro baker from the province of Matanzas, Junco was a labor activist from his youth and joined the Cuban Communist Party in 1926 or 1927. Soon thereafter he had to leave Cuba and went to Mexico, where he assisted Mella in organizing the already mentioned Cuban émigré group. After a brief visit to the Soviet Union, apparently prior to the summer of 1929, he returned to Cuba, rebelled against the Comintern’s “ultra-leftist” line, and organized his own party faction, which led to his expulsion. He subsequently joined Antonio Guiteras’ Young Cuba organization, which merged with the Cuban Revolutionary Party in 1936. As a leader of the party’s worker section, he was looked upon as a dangerous enemy by the Communists, who had allied themselves with Batista in 1938. On May 8, 1942, Junco was to be the principal speaker at a memorial gathering in honor of Antonio Guiteras in Sancti-Spiritus, Central Cuba, and the Communist Party, now represented in the government coalition, sent a gang of armed hoodlums to disrupt the meeting. Junco was gunned down by the hoodlums as he stood at the speaker’s rostrum.

²⁰ O. Rodríguez, “Our Present Task in Cuba: Commentary on the Directives of the Caribbean Bureau of the Comintern,” *The Communist*, Vol. X, No. 6, June 1931.

²¹ “The Rise of the Revolutionary Movement in Cuba,” *The Communist*, Vol. XII, No. 6, June 1933.

unemployment; cancellation of the indebtedness of farmers and small shopkeepers; and suspension of Cuban government debt payments to North American banks. These demands were followed by a proclamation of equality for all Cubans regardless of race and full rights of self-determination for Negroes in areas where they constituted the majority, and only then by political slogans demanding the “overthrow of the blood-stained Machado regime,” the “liberation of political prisoners,” and the “restoration of democratic liberties.” At the end came anti-imperialistic slogans aimed at the United States.²²

On August 7, the rumor spread through Havana that Machado had resigned, and the populace poured jubilantly into the streets. This news, however, proved wrong. Soldiers and police were called out and fired on the crowds. There were dead and wounded. Ambassador Sumner Welles conferred with the top officers of the Cuban Army and suggested that they persuade Machado to step down.

With his back to the wall, Machado called in the Communist leaders of the CNOC on August 8 and promised to meet their major demands—apparently including legalization of the union movement—if they would stop the anti-government strike. What were the Communists to do? The Caribbean Bureau of the Comintern had directed them to concentrate on working-class demands for concrete concessions and to draw a sharp dividing line between themselves and the bourgeois-democratic forces. At the same time, they feared the possibility of US intervention if disorders continued. The result was that they acceded to Machado’s proposals and publicly appealed to the masses to end the strike.²³

This proved to be a grave mistake for which the Cuban Communists would have to pay heavily in the future—a mistake, however, that stemmed directly from the Comintern line of the period, as transmitted to the Cuban party through the Comintern’s Caribbean Bureau and the Central Committee of the CPUSA. The Communist appeal for cessation of the strike went unheeded by the masses, who regarded it as all the more traitorous because it came just one day after the shootings of August 7.²⁴ Moreover, on August 11, the army leadership demanded Machado’s resignation,

and the next day he fled the country. Carlos Manuel de Cespedes, a hitherto little-known politician who was acceptable to the army leaders, to all “moderate” elements, and to the United States, was named Provisional President.

But instead of diminishing, unrest continued to mount. Machado’s overthrow and the crippling of his power apparatus—especially of his hated police, many of whom were hunted down in the streets and killed—opened the floodgates to a spontaneous and chaotic revolutionary movement which spread throughout the country. In the cities, strikes and demonstrations multiplied; in the rural areas, workers occupied sugar mills and established “soviets.” In some provincial towns, revolutionary groups seized local governing authority, sometimes under the red flag.

Communists vs. Nationalists

On September 4 a new upheaval took place. Sergeant Fulgencio Batista unleashed an army insurrection, declared the officers dismissed, and—along with his non-commissioned officers—assumed command of the armed forces, placing them at the disposal of the intellectual national revolutionaries and democrats, who championed a politically unknown professor of medicine, Ramon Grau San Martin, to replace Cespedes. After a few days of government by a five-man junta, Grau was made Provisional President, assuming what could hardly be described as power. The students who rallied around him and set the tone of his government inspired enthusiasm, but they were not only without experience and organization, but also without clearly-defined goals and a sense of realities. What the situation was like in the presidential palace at the time was recorded by an American news correspondent in Havana as follows:

Visiting the palace is like visiting a lunatic asylum with all the inmates turned loose to do as they please. . . . In the press room I find soldiers sitting on all the desks, smoking. . . . Finally I arrive at the cabinet room where President Grau receives everyone. It is a long narrow room with a long narrow table. The President sits at the

²² William Simons, “Background to Recent Events,” *The Communist*, Vol. XII, No. 9, September 1933.

²³ Nine months later, *Inprecorr* (English edition, Vol. XIV, No. 27, May 4, 1934) explained the decision of the Cuban party leaders in these terms: “The Central Committee believed at the time that an armed struggle against Machado would lead directly to imperialistic intervention, and that the Cuban people were not ready for such a fight. This was the reason why the Central Committee called upon the workers to break off the strike after it had already started to turn into an armed struggle.”

²⁴ It should be noted that Communist historians in recent years have covered up this episode. For example, no mention is made of it either in a 47-page article by the Russian his-

torian, E. L. Nitoburg, dealing with events in Cuba between 1930 and 1935 and published in a volume entitled *Kuba* (Publishing House of the USSR Academy of Sciences, Moscow, 1961, pp. 357-403), or in German Communist historian Jürgen Hell’s account of this period in his *Kurze Geschichte des kubanischen Volkes* (Berlin, 1966, pp. 239-257). Writing in Cuba in 1964, Fabio Grobart could not help admitting the episode, but in analyzing it he carefully avoided any hint of contributory Comintern responsibility and further tried to hide the truth by not even mentioning the date of Machado’s meeting with the Communist leaders and pretending that the compromise was concluded *prior* to the events of August 7 and then repudiated by the party when those events occurred (see *Cuba Socialista*, August 9, 1966, p. 117).

head of the table, surrounded by the *Directorio Estudiantil*. . . . No one around the President pays the slightest attention to him, nor has the courtesy to stop talking long enough for him to make himself heard.²⁵

The Grau government lasted only four months, but during that brief span it poured forth a flood of revolutionary decrees, manifestos, and laws. The eight-hour workday, minimum-wage regulations, legalization of all parties and labor unions, the right to strike, freedom of the press, and measures benefiting the rural population—all were enacted into law. In addition, the new regime instituted highly popular measures aimed at North American interests, including government takeover of the electric-power company, reduction of power rates, and a unilateral moratorium on all foreign debt payments. Especially noteworthy was a decree “nationalizing” labor: effective immediately, it stipulated that at least half the employees of all enterprises in Cuba must be native-born Cubans, and that the rest must, wherever possible, be naturalized Cuban citizens.

Feeling its interests threatened, the United States withheld recognition from the Grau regime and dispatched warships which cruised menacingly off the coast but took no hostile action. That the US government refrained from direct intervention was attributable to the sagacity of President Roosevelt and the new US special envoy to Havana, Jefferson Caffery, who strove—with eventual success—to bring an end to the chaotic, revolutionary and anti-imperialistic Grau government by political means.

For chaos still gripped the country, and Grau found himself confronted with many opposition elements. There were the dismissed army officers who, expecting help from the US, had armed and barricaded themselves in a Havana hotel, from which they eventually had to be driven out by Batista’s troops with artillery fire. There were the landowners, capitalists, industrialists and businessmen who feared the loss of their property holdings and profits. There was the ABC organization, which engineered an insurrection that cost many lives. There were the tens of thousands of Spaniards who faced losing their jobs as a result of the Grau government’s “nationalization” of labor. Last but not least, there were the Communists, who were reaching for power.

The German Communist historian, Jürgen Hell, calling Grau “the stout and incorruptible anti-imperialist and patriot” who “embodied the national revolution,” has maintained that “the revolution could have been saved if there had been a national block with a single anti-imperialistic program and a *single* candidate—Grau San Martín.”²⁶ Hell is frankly critical of the

course taken at the time by the Communists, who mistakenly “set the immediate assumption of power by the proletariat as a near-term objective.” “The existing conditions,” he points out, “precluded the immediate seizure of power by the proletariat and the poor peasants, because the young Communist Party . . . was still small.”²⁷

Instead of offering a united front to Grau, the Communists attacked his government as representative of “the big landowners and the bourgeoisie” and made their slogan “All power to the soviets!” They also attacked the decree “nationalizing” labor as narrowly nationalistic, thus losing many potential followers.²⁸ They likewise failed to take advantage of the divisions which began to crop up within the government—particularly between army leader Batista, who had elevated himself to the rank of colonel, and the radical Minister of Interior, Dr. Antonio Guiteras. Batista, who was increasingly becoming the man most trusted by US Ambassador Caffery and the “moderate” elements, did everything to bring the chaotic situation under control by military force. On the other hand, Guiteras insisted above all on pushing ahead with revolutionary-democratic measures. The Communists, however, shunned Guiteras, whom they characterized as a “left social-fascist.”

Three months after the Grau government finally collapsed in January 1934, having lost even the support of the students, the Second Congress of the Communist Party in April sought to justify the party’s course by claiming that the growing influence of Grau and Guiteras among the workers presented “a special danger” which made it “urgently necessary to unmask them.”²⁹ Thus, the resolution adopted by the Congress declared in part:

. . . the fundamental danger lies in the influence of the bourgeois-landlord parties of the “Left” and their reformist, anarchist, Trotskyite agents. . . . It is . . . necessary to lay down as a specific task the unmasking of these elements and their campaigns of demagoguery by exposing the role of the *Auténticos* [the party founded by Grau] and Guiteras after coming to power, and their policy in favor of the bourgeois-landlord-imperialist domination.³⁰

Even as late as December 1934, after the Cuban Communists had already begun to realize how mistaken their course had been, an article written by one of

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

²⁸ As a 1935 report published by the Foreign Policy Association, New York (*Problems of the New Cuba*) pointed out, “This decree and other nationalist measures led to a noticeable improvement in the living standards of the Cuban workers and contributed to the defeat of the Communists.”

²⁹ Manuel Valencia, *The Second Party Congress of the CP of Cuba*, in *Inprecorr* (Eng. ed.), No. 34, June 15, 1934.

³⁰ “The Present Situation, Perspectives and Tasks in Cuba” (Resolutions of the Second Congress of the CP of Cuba), in *The Communist*, Vol. XIII, No. 11, Nov. 11, 1934.

²⁵ Ruby Hart Phillips, *Cuba, Island of Paradox*, New York, McDowell, Obolensky, 1959, p. 73.

²⁶ Hell, *op. cit.*, pp. 246, 264.

the party's top officials, Julian Ordoqui, and published in the monthly organ of the CPUSA, continued to take the same line. "Guiteras," declared the author, "calls upon the masses to trust that he, with his 'revolution,' will solve the situation. [But] as the Communist Party of Cuba has correctly stated, what Guiteras, with his 'Left' demagoguery, is preparing is a *coup d'état* in which certain elements of the army that are antagonistic to Batista will take part."³¹

Writing in 1948, a Soviet historian advanced a quite different but no less misleading explanation of the Cuban party's reasons for not supporting Grau:

[On one side,] the old political parties, the businessmen, and the representatives of American interests came out against Grau; these groups thought the government was "too far to the Left." On the other side, Grau was also opposed by elements of the labor movement under Communist leadership, because they regarded the government as too moderate and ineffectual to wage the fight against imperialism.³²

This could lead the reader to infer that the Communists stood for a far more aggressive line against North American imperialism than did Grau and Guiteras. Had this in fact been the case, the Communists would probably have suffered a loss of popular sympathy since the masses were afraid of US intervention, but on the other hand they might have enhanced their prestige among the radical intellectuals.

In reality, however, the party's policy in this respect reflected the current views of the Comintern, which feared that the Cuban Communists might go too far in their "anti-imperialism," and therefore sought to restrain them. Indicative of the Comintern's position was a lengthy article by G. Sinani, then the Comintern's Russian expert for Latin American questions, which appeared in both *The Communist International* (Russian edition, No. 20, October 15, 1933) and the CPUSA's *The Communist* (Vol. XII, No. 12, December 1933). Writing under the title, "A New Phase in the Revolutionary Events in Cuba," Sinani advised the Cuban Communists to do everything necessary, through concessions, to avert North American intervention. He went on to say:

The Communist Party of Cuba considers it inadvisable for the workers to seize American enterprises and [instead] puts forward the slogan of workers' control. . . . The Communist Party of Cuba considers it inadvisable to force the seizure of plantations belonging to Amer-

ican capital and fights above all for considerable reductions in the rent for this land, for the annulment of all the old debts of the peasants, and for improvement of the situation of agricultural workers. . . . The Communist Party of Cuba considers it advisable for a workers' and peasants' government, if it should be formed, to enter into negotiations with the government of the USA on the conditions for nationalization of big foreign properties while not abandoning this nationalization: i.e., it allows the possibility of buying out these properties. With the same aim, the Communist Party of Cuba allows the possibility of retaining American ownership to some extent in the form of concessions. . . .

Influenced by such counsels from the Comintern, the Cuban Communists in effect joined with the reactionaries in a united front against the representatives of the "national bourgeoisie" and turned against nationalism as well as against any extreme form of anti-imperialism. The result was that while the party grew both in size (reportedly reaching a membership of 6,000 in 1933) and in influence, it alienated itself from the "national bourgeoisie" and the anti-imperialist and democratic forces in the country. It also failed either to consolidate its influence among labor or to provide any real guidance to the revolutionary peasant groups which took up arms in some parts of the country.

The Party Congress of April 1934 explicitly recognized that the party still had not become a "mass party" and was not yet sufficiently "bolshevized." It further acknowledged that the party continued to be influenced by opportunistic and anarchistic ideas; that it suffered from a heavy turnover in membership, from lack of discipline, and from a low ideological level; that it had failed to gain a foothold in the armed forces and to consolidate its influence in the unions, had neglected its work among the peasants, and had generally lagged behind developments.³³ A truly imposing catalogue of shortcomings!

Still more disastrous, however, were the consequences of the Communists' totally wrong assessment of the revolutionary situation in Cuba. Even after the revolutionary movement had already passed its zenith, the party leadership continued to act on the assumption that the revolution was still in an ascending phase. As late as the end of 1934, the Communists had not yet undertaken any meaningful revision of their tactics or made any attempt to forge a united front with the defeated but still militant democratic-revolutionary forces.

Grau had already been replaced in January 1934 by former Colonel Carlos Mendieta, who took office as Provisional President. As a leader of the "nationalists" and a determined foe of Machado, he enjoyed considerable personal prestige and promised to keep intact all the achievements of the Grau era. But behind

³¹ J. Ordoqui, "The Rise of the Revolutionary Movement in Cuba," *The Communist*, Vol. XIII, No. 12, December 1934.

³² L. T. Zubok, *Imperialisticheskaya politika SSA v stranakh karibskovo basseyne*, Moscow, 1948, p. 313.

³³ "The Present Situation, Perspectives and Tasks in Cuba," *The Communist*, Vol. XIII, No. 9, September 1934.

Mendieta stood Batista and his army. Many segments of the population had grown weary of fighting and wanted normalization of the economy and improved relations with the United States. For its part, the Roosevelt administration not only recognized Mendieta's government but also proceeded to renounce its right of intervention in Cuba under the notorious Platt amendment³⁴ and returned the Isle of Pines to Cuban control. In March 1934, a new general strike called by the Communists was thwarted without major difficulty, and the party's influence as well as its membership began to decline.

At the Conference of Latin American Communists in Montevideo in October 1934, the Cuban delegate "Bueno" self-critically condemned the past line pursued by the Cuban party and gave 4,000 as the party's approximate current membership.³⁵ He emphasized the difficulty of adhering to an anti-imperialist line in view of Cuba's economic dependence on the United States, citing instances in which Communist speakers who attacked the US too vehemently had been shouted down or prevented from speaking by workers. He also pointed out that the Communists' advocacy of collectivization had been very damaging to them among the rural population.

In the last and biggest mass strike of March 1935, which rang down the curtain on the revolutionary period, the Communists played no role. As even a Soviet historian has acknowledged, the Communists proved incapable of taking the initiative, and leadership of the strike "was in the hands of the national reformists of the Cuban Revolutionary Party [the *Autenticos*] and the Young Cuba organization led by Guiteras."³⁶ The strike was initiated by radical students at the University of Havana and quickly spread over the country, causing virtual paralysis as the cities were deprived of electric power and transportation services. Newspaper employees and even government workers joined in the strike, and the capital was racked by violence as the student revolutionaries resorted to bomb attacks and clashed with the police and army troops. President Mendieta responded by suspending the constitution and placing the country under martial law. The revolutionary movement was ruthlessly crushed by armed force, and its principal leader, Guiteras, was captured and assassinated by Batista's sol-

diers. *Autentico* leader Grau San Martin and most of his friends went into exile.

At the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern in the summer of 1935, Cuban delegate "Marin" frankly stated that his party's "principal mistake" had been "to mechanically place the class interests of the proletariat in opposition to the interests of the national liberation struggle and the tasks of the bourgeois-democratic revolution."³⁷ With the formal blessing of the Comintern World Congress, the era of the popular front was about to begin for Communists everywhere, including Cuba.

Shift to the United Front

According to the same Cuban delegate to the Seventh Comintern Congress, the Central Committee of the Cuban party, after its fourth plenum in February 1935, had already broached the question of a united front in an offer made to Guiteras' Young Cuba organization but not to Grau's *Autenticos*. The result, he added, was that no united front materialized and the March 1935 general strike "ended in defeat."³⁸

But even if the Communists had extended their offer to the *Autenticos*, the latter would not have been likely to accept it, judging from a statement which Eduardo Chibas, one of Grau's closest associates, had made at a student meeting in Havana in November 1934. Addressing the meeting, Chibas had this to say about the Communists:

Those so-called revolutionary leaders who, after the massacre of August 7, 1933, ordered the proletariat to go back to work are today claiming to speak in the name of the revolution. [Yet] they are employing their same old tactic of attacking revolutionaries more violently than they do reactionaries. The more revolutionary a person is, the more strongly the Communists attack him. They attack the ABC more strongly than they do the Conservatives, and the *Autenticos* more strongly than the ABC—and as for Guiteras, they would love to eat him alive. Just because I am so much attacked by these little leaders [*lidericos*] of tropical communism, I am sure that I am a good revolutionary!"³⁹

The full significance of these words becomes apparent when we consider that Chibas, who always remained a determined anti-Communist, split with Grau's *Autenticos* in the mid-1940's to form his own party: the Party of the Cuban People (commonly known as the *Ortodoxos*), which in 1952 put up as a

³⁴ The Platt Amendment, named after its author, Senator Orville Platt of Connecticut, was attached to an army appropriation bill passed by the US Congress in 1901, which provided for the termination of US military government in Cuba following the war with Spain but imposed certain conditions qualifying Cuban independence. These conditions, the most important of which gave the United States the right to intervene in Cuban domestic affairs whenever it deemed necessary, were incorporated in the Cuban constitution in June 1901 and had the effect of limiting the Cuban people's right of revolution.

³⁵ *The Communist International* (Russian ed.), No. 9, March 20, 1935, pp. 48–51.

³⁶ E. L. Nitoburg, *op. cit.*, p. 397.

³⁷ *Rundschau über Politik Wirtschaft und Arbeiterbewegung* (Basel), No. 50, Sept. 25, 1935. (This was the renamed German edition of *Inprecorr*, set up in Switzerland after Hitler's rise to power.)

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Quoted in Alberto Baeza Flores, *Las cadenas vienen de lejos*, Mexico City, 1960, p. 111.

candidate for parliament one of its adherents—Fidel Castro.

Notwithstanding the reported Communist united-front overture of February 1935, it was actually some time before the Cuban party could bring itself to undertake the serious pursuit of united or popular-front tactics. Even after the abortive March strike, it still did not clearly realize—as the Cuban delegate to the Seventh Comintern Congress (presumably Blas Roca) himself stated—“that the need for united-front tactics had become even more imperative in the new situation.”⁴⁰ Not until its session in early 1936 did the party Central Committee finally come out with a re-analysis of the Cuban situation, which stated:

The Cuban revolution is at present passing through its national phase, and in this phase the revolutionary role played by other strata of the population besides the proletariat and the peasants must not be underestimated. . . . all strata of the population ranging from the proletariat to the national bourgeoisie, fraternally linked by a common interest in the liberation of our country, can and must build a broad popular front against the foreign oppressors. . . .⁴¹

But it was easier for the Communists to beat the propaganda drums for a popular front than to organize one. In January 1936, Cuba held a presidential election in which neither the Communists nor the *Autenticos* were legally allowed to participate. The victor was Miguel Mariano Gomez, a highly popular ex-mayor of Havana and liberal politician. Though initially favored by Batista, he was in fact the most “progressive” of the three competing candidates. The Communists, however, only realized this months later when Gomez, not long after taking office, became involved in a power struggle with Batista, who finally succeeded in engineering his impeachment by a supine parliament in December 1936. But even if the Communists had recognized Gomez’ “progressive” character earlier, the formation of a popular front with the forces supporting him would have been beyond the realm of possibility. Indeed, the Communists’ sole and very meager success in winning outside allies was the formation of a united committee comprising their own representatives, the Cuban *Apristas* (a small group which had embraced the ideas of the Peruvian Victor Haya de la Torre), some members of the Young Cuba organization, and representatives of several other small groups formed by Cuban political exiles in the United States. This committee remained a meaningless and ephemeral creation. As for Grau San Martin’s *Autenticos*, they shunned collaboration with the Communists, and so did the rest of the Young Cuba members, who shortly afterwards merged with the *Autenticos*.

It is worth noting that the Communists even then were still censuring their “petty-bourgeois” allies for their putschist propensities, while conversely they were looked upon by the national revolutionaries as too peaceful and moderate. Thus, a leading Communist, Cesar Vilar, charged in late 1937 that both the *Autenticos* and the Young Cuba organization had engaged in putschist tactics which facilitated “the realization of Batista’s reactionary dictatorship.”⁴² (Interestingly enough, more than two decades later, Blas Roca—with at least indirect reference to a “putschist” named Castro—echoed much the same complaint in claiming that the Communist Party had “enlightened the masses about the error of insurrectionism and made it clear that the only path to victory lies in organizing the masses. Yet the reactionaries [sic] have accused the Communist Party of betrayal. . . .”⁴³

After the removal of Gomez, Vice-President Federico Laredo Bru assumed the presidency, but the real ruler of Cuba was Batista, whom Comintern spokesmen now began attacking as a fascist dictator and “an imitator of Mussolini and Hitler.” In a statement issued in December 1936, the Central Committee of the CPUSA declared:

. . . the issue of democracy vs. fascist dictatorship has been sharply raised by the putsch of Colonel Batista. After vainly trying to create a mass base for his dictatorship by demagogic methods, he has carried out—with the help of Wall Street bankers and the sugar trust—an attack on the lawful Gomez government in order to destroy it and, with it, every movement for real democracy in Cuba.⁴⁴

A similar view was later echoed by Cesar Vilar in his article cited above. Describing Batista as a friend of Spanish dictator Franco and a man who committed daily provocations against the people, he declared that nothing could be worse than the realization of Batista’s manifest goal of making himself president of Cuba. “The opposition parties,” he added, “are against any future government under Batista, because such a government would be even more reactionary than the present one.”⁴⁵

Popular Front With Batista

Against this background, it must surely be one of history’s most ironic twists that it was none other than the Communists who provided Batista with the mass

⁴² “The Military Dictatorship in Cuba and the Struggle for Democracy,” in *Communist International* (Russian ed.), January 1938.

⁴³ Blas Roca, *Las Experiencias de Cuba*, Havana, 1959, pp. 1–11.

⁴⁴ *Rundschau* . . . (Basel), No. 2, Jan. 14, 1937.

⁴⁵ Vilar, *loc. cit.* (fn. 42).

⁴⁰ *Rundschau* . . . (Basel), No. 60, Oct. 30, 1935.

⁴¹ Hell, *op. cit.*, p. 274.

base that he had hitherto sought in vain. For their part, the Communists, having been outlawed virtually from the party's birth in 1925, saw advantages to be gained by proffering their cooperation to Batista in return for the legalization of the party. As for Batista, he was basically neither a "fascist" nor a "reactionary"—nor even a military dictator in the classical mold. A mulatto from the lower class who never tried to conceal his origins, he was ambitious, keenly interested in enriching himself and his friends, and yet at the same time anxious to appear as a "democrat" and proponent of social reform.⁴⁶ From 1936 on, he aspired to win the presidency in a free election, but he was looked upon with mistrust by the big landowners and upper bourgeoisie, while the "national revolutionaries" regarded him as their archenemy. He consequently turned to the Communists, fully confident that he could use them for his own purposes.

The legalization process was gradual. The first step, taken in late 1937, was the recognition as a legal party of a sort of Communist-front organization called the *Partido Union Revolucionaria* (Party of Revolutionary Union) headed by Juan Marinello, an intellectual whose close links with the Communists were a matter of common knowledge. This was followed shortly afterward by the proclamation of a general political amnesty. Then, starting May 1, 1938, the Communists—even though the party had not yet been officially legalized—were permitted to launch a daily newspaper called *Noticias de Hoy* (usually referred to simply as *Hoy*) under the editorship of Anibal Escalante, one of the top Communist leaders. In June of the same year, the party Central Committee was able to hold, openly and without interference, its Tenth Plenum, which adopted its first, rather restrained pro-Batista resolutions. Finally, on September 23, 1938, the party was fully legalized, subsequently merging with the *Partido Union Revolucionaria* to form the *Union Revolucionaria Comunista* (Communist Revolutionary Union), which held its first congress in January 1939.

The Communists' entry into this peculiar kind of "popular front" with Batista naturally evoked both anger and confusion in Cuban national-revolutionary and democratic circles. As Raul Roa, now Castro's foreign minister, later wrote in retrospect,

The Communists' offer of support to Batista in return for their own legalization caused indescribable confusion

and contributed to the intensification of the crisis in which the revolutionary movement found itself. From then on, the labor movement was subordinated to the requirements of coexistence with the government and the electoral interests of the Communist Party.⁴⁷

Needless to say, Comintern spokesmen sought to present the developments in Cuba before world opinion in a quite different light. An article published in the renamed German edition of *Inprecorr* in August 1938 offered this curious explanation:

Cuba has made important strides towards the restoration of democracy. Under the slogan "Unity of all anti-Batista forces," the Cuban people have found the basis for a minimal united action which has forced the dictator Batista to restore a number of democratic liberties. . . . All attempts to manipulate the press have proven futile, and today the Cuban people have the daily people's [sic] newspaper *Hoy* and the weekly review *Mediodia*, which courageously stand up for the rights of the people.⁴⁸

Some eight months later, in an article surveying the international labor movement at the beginning of 1939, the Russian edition of *Communist International* boasted, with equal disregard for the truth, that "the workers [of Cuba] have been successful in obtaining the legalization of the Communist Party. The entire working class took part in this struggle."⁴⁹ Again, commenting in January 1939 on the developments in Cuba, the German edition of the same Comintern organ acknowledged that the Tenth Plenum of the Cuban party's Central Committee had come to the conclusion that Batista was "no longer the focal point of the forces of reaction," but it hastened to add:

The Communists stress that they do not thereby recognize and support Colonel Baptista [sic] as a democrat. The party takes note that Colonel Baptista has taken only some first steps along the path of respect for the democratic demands of the people.⁵⁰

In whatever light one may choose to view the party's understanding with Batista, its fortunes quickly prospered in the sunshine of official favor. Whereas the party reportedly had some 5,000 members in 1937 when it was still only semi-legal,⁵¹ the 347 delegates who attended the first congress of the *Union Revolucionaria Comunista* in January 1939 claimed to represent a total membership of 23,000.⁵² More im-

⁴⁶ It should be noted here that some of the most important laws benefiting labor and tenant farmers were enacted under Batista's auspices, including the so-called "sugar coordination" law which in effect made it impossible to dispossess small and tenant farmers, and which antedated Batista's collaboration with the Communists. It may also be mentioned that one of the issues in his conflict with President Gomez in 1936 was Batista's proposal to levy a special tax on sugar production in order to finance rural educational facilities at the expense of the sugar barons, a proposal which Gomez opposed.

⁴⁷ *XV Años Despues*, Havana, 1950, p. 219.

⁴⁸ R. A. Martinez, *Lateinamerika drei Jahre nach dem VII. Weltkongress der K.I.*, in *Rundschau* . . . , Aug. 28, 1938.

⁴⁹ No. 4, April 1939.

⁵⁰ "The Struggle for Democracy in Cuba," *Kommunistische Internationale* (Paris), Jan. 20, 1939.

⁵¹ Blas Roca, *Las Experiencias* . . . , *op. cit.*, p. 8.

⁵² This same figure was cited by Dmitri Manuilsky in a report on the world Communist movement to the 18th Congress of the CPSU in 1939. See *Rundschau* . . . , March 31, 1939.

portant, Communists (among them Lazaro Peña) assumed the leadership of the newly-established and all-embracing *Confederacion de Trabajadores de Cuba* (CTC), which entered into close collaboration with the Ministry of Labor. Later, the Communists were even to be granted their own radio station ("*Mil Diez*").

The sudden switch in the international Communist line resulting from the 1939 Hitler-Stalin pact, followed only a few months later by the outbreak of war in Europe, had a much less adverse impact on the Cuban party than on many other Communist parties. Prior to the pact, the Comintern line had called for an international united front against fascism; but with the signing of the Soviet-Nazi accord and the start of the war, Communists everywhere were called upon to oppose involvement in an "imperialistic" conflict.

This the Cuban Communists could do without compromising their collaboration with Batista, who—at least until the middle of 1941—had no inclination to let Cuba become embroiled in a faraway European conflict. Moreover, the *Autenticos*, who were the Communists' chief rivals, also were opposed to Cuban involvement, partly because of their hostility towards the United States, which was already leaning towards intervention on the side of the anti-Hitler forces.

Even so, the Nazi-Soviet pact caused a minor crisis in the Cuban party's ranks. A socialist group led by Juan Arevalo, which had joined with the Communists in organizing the *Union Revolucionaria*, turned against the new political course taken by the Soviet Union, as did many democrats; and Communist party membership began to slump, dropping to a reported 14,800 by 1941.⁵³

Elections for a Constituent Assembly to frame a new constitution for Cuba were held in November 1939. The Communists took part in the election campaign as part of the "Social Democratic" Batista coalition, winning six out of the total 76 Assembly seats. The majority of seats (41) actually went to a heterogeneous anti-Batista coalition, with 18 seats going to the *Autenticos*, 15 to the Conservatives, and the rest to other groups (including four for the ABC).

In the drafting of the 1940 Constitution, the Communists and *Autenticos* vied with each other in their efforts to make it as "progressive" as possible. The resultant document was designed to turn Cuba into a welfare state, but many of its prescriptions were unrealizable because they went far beyond the country's capabilities. Besides stipulating all the democratic free-

doms, the Constitution also guaranteed the "right to work" of every citizen and provided for a 44-hour maximum workweek and four weeks of paid vacation per year for all workers and employees, for the establishment of arbitration boards and labor courts in which the unions would have a decisive voice, and for restrictions on the right of employers to dismiss workers. Article 90 proscribed large landholdings. Another article fixed the salary of every primary-school teacher at one-millionth of the state budget (a provision which, if it could have been carried out, would have placed Cuba's primary-school teachers among the highest-paid in all of Latin America). It is incidentally of no little interest that this Constitution, afterwards praised so lavishly by the Communists, expressly proscribed any political party which did not stand for the principles of representative democracy.

To the extent that the provisions of the 1940 Constitution became reality—and this was largely true in those areas affecting municipal workers and especially industrial labor, as well as the regular employees of sugar mills and of major banks and commercial establishments—they had an adverse impact on productivity.⁵⁴ The Constitution also brought about a far-reaching fusion of the government and the union movement, with the result that the status of wage earners now depended less on their own efforts than on the paternalistic intervention of the Ministry of Labor, the new labor courts, and the President of the Republic. The labor movement and, with it, the Communist Party became, so to speak, "integral elements of the state." Once again, the leaders of "Creole communism" were critically dependent on their ability to maintain good and close relations with whatever government was in power.

The Communists were the first to support Batista's candidacy for the presidency in the July 1940 election following promulgation of the new Constitution. His election was only made certain, however, by the entry into the Batista coalition in March of the sharply anti-Communist Conservative Party. The Communists protested the entry of the Conservatives, which tended to undermine the credibility of the "progressive" character of the Batista coalition (and of the Communists' own policy), but they were powerless to block it. When the balloting took place in mid-July, Batista—the onetime army sergeant, later to become the dictator of Cuba and the friend of the North Americans and propertied Cubans—captured 60 percent of the vote and thus won the presidency for a four-year term.

As a result of their increased freedom of action and more flexible policies, the Communists had indeed grown in strength and influence, but they had also

⁵³ Hell, *op. cit.*, p. 288.

⁵⁴ See International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, *Report on Cuba*, Baltimore, 1951.

widened the gulf between themselves and the “national revolutionaries” and changed the character of the party. As two North American observers commented retrospectively in 1962, the Cuban Communists after 1934 put forward a fairly consistent domestic program “calling for democratic and honest government, expanded social benefits, and economic advancement of urban and rural workers,” but their “fortunes shifted mainly according to their relations with the government in power.”⁵⁵ This last observation, though essentially correct, seems a rather charitable characterization of the Communists’ political relationships. Certainly, by 1940, or even as early as 1937–38, the Communist Party of Blas Roca bore little if any resemblance to the original party of Jose Mella and Martinez Villena.

The Cuban Communists in World War II

Nazi Germany’s invasion of the USSR in June 1941 brought a new turnabout in the international Communist line, which switched overnight from condemnation of the European war as an “imperialist” struggle to its exaltation as a “peoples’ war” against Nazism and Fascism. For the Cuban Communists, as for Communists everywhere, this was a far easier switch than the one they had had to make in 1939 following the Hitler-Stalin pact. They promptly came out as fervent champions of democracy and the war against the Axis, and in so doing, they were in complete harmony with President Batista, whose foreign policy was by now closely attuned to that of the United States. In December of 1941, Cuba followed on the heels of Washington in declaring war on Japan and the Axis powers.

The Communists abruptly ceased all tirades and demonstrations against both US imperialism and the domestic bourgeoisie. A political truce was proclaimed, and national unity in the cause of anti-fascism became the supreme slogan. The Communist-controlled CTC, at its 1942 congress, voted to forego all strike action for the duration of the war. The United States underwent a sudden transformation from an imperialistic oppressor to an admired, democratic ally. In the first edition of his book, *Los Fundamentos del Socialismo en Cuba*, published in Havana in 1943, Communist party chief Blas Roca wrote (p. 111):

The Cuban people need and desire close and cordial relations with the United States because of the countless advantages such relations bring to them. This relationship must be continued after the conclusion of the war because it is absolutely essential to the fruitful develop-

ment of the Cuban economy, on which the nation’s progress depends.⁵⁶

Small wonder, then, that President Batista decided to reward the Communists by inviting them to participate directly in the government. Juan Marinello, head of the *Union Revolucionaria Comunista*, was the first to enter the government as minister without portfolio in March 1943, to be followed later by Carlos Rafael Rodriguez. In a report to the National Executive Committee of the Union, Blas Roca hailed the formation of “a government of national unity” including “our chairman, Juan Marinello” as “the greatest of all the triumphs of the *Union Revolucionaria Comunista*.”⁵⁷

The Cuban Communists were now pursuing a line that was almost as far removed from orthodox communism as that of the wartime leader of the US Communist Party, Earl Browder. Easily the most “revisionist” of all Communist party leaders of the war period, Browder preached the practical end of revolutionary class struggle, the peaceful transformation of capitalism, the disappearance of imperialism, and lasting peaceful coexistence between the Soviet Union and the democratic-capitalist world. He even went so far, in May 1944, as to put through the formal dissolution of the CPUSA and its replacement by a Communist Political Association pledged to shelve the issue of socialism for the sake of national unity.

The Cuban Communists did not emulate this latter action, partly because they were not asked to, and partly because dissolution of the party would have caused complications in view of its representation in the parliament and government, its now sizable bureaucratic apparatus and valuable property, and its unquestioned leadership of the labor movement. The party did, however, change its name in 1944 to *Partido Socialista Popular* (PSP)—a change which had considerable symbolic significance.

The Second National Conference of the PSP, held in September 1944, reaffirmed the party’s allegiance to the principles of Browder, Batista—and Marx! “The Marxists,” declared the policy resolution of the conference, “stand for national unity and for its continuation, extension, and consolidation under such conditions as may prevail in Cuba after the war. The policy of national unity, for the Marxists, is a long-range [*de largo alcance*] policy.” Blas Roca stressed the same point in February 1945 when he stated that

⁵⁶ This passage was excised from postwar editions of Roca’s book.

⁵⁷ Blas Roca, *Por que y para que participan los Comunistas en el Gabinete?* (Report presented to the National Executive Committee of the URC, March 26, 1943), Havana, 1943, p. 3.

⁵⁵ Wyatt MacGaffey and Clifford R. Barnett, *Cuba*, New Haven, The American University, 1962, p. 128.

the party's espousal of class collaboration was "no momentary and ephemeral policy, but a long-range and enduring one on the progressive road toward the conquest of all rights of the working class."⁵⁸

(To skip briefly ahead of our story, when French Communist leader Jacques Duclos, after a personal meeting with Stalin, launched his attack on Browderism in a letter published in the Paris Communist journal *Cahiers du Communisme* in April 1945, he explicitly indicted the Cuban Communists along with the US party leader for their advocacy of class collaboration and continuing Communist-capitalist peaceful co-existence after the war. Responding to this attack at a meeting of the PSP National Executive Committee in June 1945, Blas Roca flatly rejected Duclos' charge that the Teheran and Yalta agreements were mere "diplomatic documents" which the US and Cuban Communists were wrongly attempting to transform "into a political platform of class peace." These agreements, declared Roca, "are regarded by us as solemn and formal undertakings which constitute a genuine platform for mankind's struggle to achieve a peace that will endure for several generations. . . . We consider the agreements, which fully conform with our views, to provide the basis for our activity."⁵⁹)

At the same time that they zealously pursued the Browderite line, the Cuban Communists were lavishing praise on Batista as a "great democrat," "the great man of our national politics who embodies Cuba's sacred ideals," and "the man who is leading the fatherland along the road of dignity and progress."⁶⁰ They also warmly defended him against his political adversaries—a fact which Batista gratefully acknowledged in a letter addressed to Blas Roca and published in *Hoy* on June 13, 1944. The letter read:

My dear Blas! With reference to your letter transmitted to me by our mutual friend, Minister Without Portfolio Dr. Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, I am happy to acknowledge that my government has received and today continues to receive effective and loyal support from the *Partido Socialista Popular*, its leadership and its masses.

Meanwhile, the party's electoral strength showed a marked upsurge, reaching a new high of about 120,000 in 1944 as compared with the 80,000 votes polled by the Communists in the 1942 parliamentary elections. Yet, according to official Communist sources, the party had only 14,692 dues-paying members in 1944.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Blas Roca and Lazaro Peña, *La Colaboracion entre obreros y patronos*, Havana, 1945, p. 18.

⁵⁹ *En Defensa del Pueblo* (Statements by Blas Roca, R. Rodríguez, and Manuel Lizardo before the National Executive Committee of the PSP, June 22–23, 1945), Havana, 1945, pp. 9 and 16.

⁶⁰ *Hoy*, Jan. 16 and Feb. 5, 1944.

⁶¹ Fabio Grobart, in *Fundamentos* (Havana), December 1946, p. 348.

Membership figures for the Cuban party are not very meaningful, however, because they showed wide fluctuations during the years of the party's legal existence—and in any case the average party member of the popular-front period was hardly a Bolshevik in either the ideological or an organizational sense.

With the presidential election scheduled for the summer of 1944 approaching, Batista declined to run for a second term. His Social Democratic coalition, which included the Communists, put forward Dr. Carlos Saladrigas, who had held the premiership under Batista, as its candidate to run against the opposition parties' nominee, former President Grau San Martín. The PSP defended its support of Saladrigas—a one-time leader of the ABC, which the Communists had long denounced as fascist—by claiming that "Saladrigas symbolizes, for a thousand reasons, the continuation of the progressive, democratic and populist course of Fulgencio Batista."⁶²

As a party, the Communists scored a substantial success in the election, the number of Communist votes reaching 130,000, or about 8 percent of all the ballots cast. Nevertheless, Saladrigas went down to defeat, and Grau emerged the winner. This prompted a quick change of tack by the Communists, with Blas Roca proclaiming the victory of the party's erstwhile bitter foe to be a "triumph of the people." The Communists, indeed, had good reason to be optimistic about the chances of preserving their political position despite Saladrigas' defeat. Their own share of the popular vote had risen, and Grau did not have a large enough majority in parliament to be able to form a government without the support of the Communists, whose representatives could now tip the balance.

The Communists and the Autenticos

The leaders of the PSP hastened to offer their support to the new chief of state, provided he was willing to demonstrate the progressive character of his government by sympathetic treatment of the Communists. The party's main concern was to protect its leadership monopoly in the unions against a threatened takeover by the office-hungry "labor commissions" of the *Autenticos*, and Grau, needing Communist support, agreed to the bargain. In the face of protests from his own party, Grau left Lazaro Peña and his associates in undisturbed control of organized labor, while Juan Marinello was appointed Vice-President of the Senate. In return, the Communists came out as strongly for Grau as they had for Batista.

The social policy of the new government was in fact no less "progressive" than that of its predecessor.

⁶² *Hoy*, May 13, 1944, quoted in Alberto Baez Flores, *op. cit.*, p. 238.

In some circles, indeed, the liberal interpretation of democratic freedoms was carried to such lengths as to bring certain sectors of public life to the verge of chaos. If there was freedom for the ordinary citizens to criticize everyone, including the government, without restraint, there was also freedom for the new masters of the government to enrich themselves, as well as freedom for the many gangster-like groups of revolutionaries, who had been kept pretty well in check under Batista, to gun each other down and prey upon other citizens. To cap it all, the absolute freedom accorded to the mass media made these abuses appear worse than they actually were, leading to a crisis and an eventual split in the *Autentico* movement, with a group under Eduardo Chibas breaking away to form a new party known as the *Ortodoxos*.

With the end of the war and the re-emergence of conflicts between the Soviet Union and the West, the PSP now began a difficult process of ideological rearmament. Blas Roca, as noted earlier, at first tried to stick to the Browderite line in the face of the Duclos attack of April 1945, but finding himself under growing pressure from many of his own party officials who were openly turning against the no longer fashionable wartime strategy of national political truce, he was eventually forced to retreat. As early as July 1945, he admitted that "all of our more recent documents stand in need of revision because they reveal dangerous errors," the principal one having been the party's belief that the United States and Great Britain would actually adhere to the resolutions taken in Teheran. He also acknowledged that it had not been "realized with sufficient clarity that capitalism would prove incapable of overcoming its inner contradictions," and that it had been an illusion to think that imperialism and colonialism would vanish.⁶³ Roca's colleague, Juan Marinello, wrote a month later that "we went astray because, without sufficient reflection and deeper analysis . . . we adopted criteria and methods . . . based on an authority and information not accessible to us." Finally, in February 1946, Roca carried this line to its logical conclusion in blaming the Cuban party's mistakes on "the corrupt anti-Marxist theories of Earl Browder."⁶⁴

Roca's February statement followed on the heels of the Third National Conference of the PSP, which took place in Havana in January. The foreign speakers included William Z. Foster, the hardline US Communist leader who had replaced Browder. With the proceedings being broadcast by the Communists' Radio *Mil Diez*, Foster seized the occasion to launch an attack

on Roca, but careful listeners were able to detect, with some surprise, that Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, who interpreted Foster's words into Spanish, softened and sometimes even omitted the US delegate's criticisms of Roca. For his part, Foster was probably more than a little astonished when, at the conclusion of the Conference, Roca was reconfirmed as secretary-general of the PSP.

The first signs of the coming Cold War, however, were not enough to trouble the close relations between Grau and the Communists, which continued undisturbed until after the parliamentary elections of June 1946. The Communists were jubilant over the election results, with the PSP garnering a total of 176,000 votes, or over 10 percent of all the ballots cast—its all-time highwater mark. In his report to the party leadership, Blas Roca boasted that "the outcome of the elections constitutes a grand confirmation (*un gran respaldo*) of the popular and progressive policy of Dr. Grau. . . . The triumph achieved by the Popular Socialists together with the *Autenticos* cannot but consolidate, broaden, and deepen their alliance." He also noted that the party had received 43,000 more votes than the number of its *afiliados* (i.e., voters registered as affiliates of a particular party)—"a very rare phenomenon in Cuba, where the parties usually have fewer voters than *afiliados*."⁶⁵

Roca's jubilation was premature and not entirely warranted. For he appeared to overlook the fact that the *Autenticos* had gained more votes than had the Communists and, most important of all, had strengthened their position in parliament to the point where Grau no longer needed the support of the PSP representatives. This soon led to a challenge of the Communists' leadership of organized labor. The "workers section" of the *Autenticos* felt that the time was ripe to take over control of the unions with the aid of the government (particularly after the appointment of *Autentico* leader Carlos Prio Socarras as Minister of Labor in 1947). After an intense struggle sometimes marked by violence, the *Autenticos*, supported by other anti-Communist unionists, finally seized control of the CTC leadership in the summer of 1947, and the "Popular Socialists" split away to establish their own CTC. Labor Minister Prio Socarras, however, refused to grant the Communist-led confederation government recognition, without which its affiliated unions could not appear before arbitration boards, call legal strikes, or conclude valid collective agree-

⁶³ Blas Roca, *En Defensa del Pueblo*, Havana, 1945; and article in *Fundamentos*, July 1945, pp. 44 ff.

⁶⁴ Statements quoted in Stuart Cole Blasier, *The Cuban and Chilean Parties—Instruments of Soviet Policy* (doctoral dissertation), Columbia University, 1955, p. 98.

⁶⁵ F. Calderio (Blas Roca), *El Triunfo Popular en las elecciones* (Report to the PSP National Executive Committee, June 22, 1946), Havana, 1946, pp. 3, 13.

ments. Its membership quickly declined and a short while later vanished altogether.

The Communist Party, too, began to lose members and influence. The Cold War was now starting to gather momentum, and the PSP, softened by the long period of "class collaboration," was ill prepared for it. In a typical display of the factual distortion characteristic of Communist historiography, Jürgen Hell writes that "the Cold War . . . raged in Cuba as a white terror."⁶⁶ Actually, the Communist Party (under the Popular Socialist Party label) remained legal until the summer of 1953. None of its leaders was arrested, and the party was able to hold meetings, engage in propaganda, and take part in elections, for the most part without interference. The loss of the government's favor did cost the Communists the right to operate their own radio station, and it is true that a few Communist leaders lost their lives as a consequence, not of anti-Communist terror, but rather of the gangster-like violence that became prevalent in the Cuban labor movement. The most prominent Communist casualty was Jesus Menendez, a member of parliament and leader of the sugar workers, who was shot and killed by an army officer in January 1948.

A new presidential election took place in June 1948. Prio Socarras was put forward by the *Autenticos* as their candidate, Dr. Nuñez Portuondo by the Liberals, and Eduardo Chibas by the *Ortodoxos*, with Prio Socarras winning the election. The PSP also put forward a candidate, Juan Marinello, who received some 140,000 votes, or about 7.5 percent of all the valid ballots cast.

There is relatively little reliable information regarding the subsequent organizational development of the party. PSP membership appears to have dropped to barely 10,000 in 1948, but after that it began to rise again—which is the best proof that the Communists were not subjected to persecution, let alone terror. In any event, Blas Roca was able to claim in 1950 that party membership had climbed back up to a figure of 19,241.⁶⁷ But it was perhaps more the quality than the size of the party membership that concerned the PSP leaders in this period. Hell quotes Blas Roca as saying in 1948:

A party cannot be good if its members are bad. A party cannot be an advance guard if it is full of laggards. We forgot that simple truth.⁶⁸

According to Hell, Roca went on to acknowledge that neither the party's members nor its *afiliados* could be expected to play any significant role once the party were proscribed or subjected to persecution. With such

material and such an organization, he warned, it would be difficult to carry on any effective work.

The fact was that the party's personnel, its ideological outlook and organizational form were all molded by the politics of the past, and as we shall see, the influence of this tradition continued to be reflected in the party's policies and strategy when Batista established his new dictatorship or—to put it more correctly—stumbled into a dictatorship which he did not want.

The Return of Batista

The spring of 1952 found Cuba preparing for another presidential election to choose a successor to Prio Socarras. It was to be a three-cornered contest between the *Autentico* candidate, Carlos Hevia; the nominee of the *Ortodoxos*, Roberto Agromonte; and ex-President Batista, who had returned to Cuba in 1948 after several years in the United States and had formed his own political organization, the Unitary Action Party. Batista's party waged a vigorous and costly campaign sharply critical of the incumbent *Autentico* administration, but all opinion polls in early 1952 indicated that the ex-President, though still enjoying considerable popularity among the Cuban lower classes, could not hope to repeat his 1940 victory. Batista chose not to gamble on the election. In the early morning hours of March 10, 1952, again with army backing, he seized power through a bloodless *coup d'état*.

But Batista, at least at first, showed no intention of setting up a harsh dictatorship. Immediately upon assuming power as Provisional President, he pledged that all democratic freedoms would be respected, and above all that the gains of the lower social strata would be preserved and extended; he called in the labor leaders and assured them that he would not interfere with their activities as long as they did not turn against him; and he immediately raised the wages of soldiers and policemen. No restriction was placed on the activities of the political parties—again provided they did not attack the new regime too brazenly. Nor were there any immediate indications of significant political opposition to Batista. The ousted *Autentico* leaders, who had lost popular support because of their corruption and tolerance of open gangster terrorism in the streets, had taken asylum in foreign embassies and shortly afterwards were allowed to leave the country. The highly popular *Ortodoxo* leader, Eduardo Chibas, had committed suicide the preceding year, and there were few political leaders of democratic orientation who commanded enough public support to be able to challenge Batista with any hope of success.

It was not long, however, before voices critical of the new regime began to be raised in the press and

⁶⁶ Hell, *op. cit.*, p. 295.

⁶⁷ Blas Roca, in *Fundamentos*, April 1950, p. 333.

⁶⁸ Hell, *op. cit.*, pp. 289–90.

on radio and television. Batista responded by promising that he would call general elections as soon as possible—a promise which he first tried to keep in November 1953, although these elections had to be cancelled because the opposition parties refused to participate.

Meanwhile, as time went on, the Batista regime did indeed begin to display much more reprehensible features. Partly responsible for this was the terror campaign launched mainly by student revolutionaries, which prompted Batista and his henchmen to resort to measures of counterterror, accompanied by the appointment of savagely sadistic elements to key positions in the police. Yet, even during the last years of the Batista dictatorship, there were intermittent periods of relative political relaxation. It must be recalled, for instance, that the regime in 1955 proclaimed a general political amnesty, one of the beneficiaries of which was Fidel Castro, then serving a long prison term for his attempted attack on the Moncada Barracks in Santiago de Cuba on July 26, 1953. It may also be mentioned that four years later, after Castro had already launched his armed struggle against the Batista dictatorship in the mountains of eastern Cuba, his programmatic “Manifesto of the Sierra Maestra” was freely published in Cuba’s most widely read weekly, *Bohemia* (July 28, 1957), with a circulation of over 500,000 copies.

The opposition to Batista sprang almost exclusively from among the middle-class intellectuals, especially the students. From the very first days, the University of Havana became a citadel of “anti-Batistianos,” with loudspeakers all over the campus calling for war against the Batista regime. The first anti-Batista conspiracy was organized by a professor of philosophy named Garcia-Barcena within a few weeks after the March 1952 coup, but was discovered and suppressed. And it was from among Barcena’s young fellow conspirators that Fidel Castro recruited some of the followers who joined him in his abortive attack on the Moncada Barracks a year later.

The Communists, Batista, and Castro

When Batista first regained power, some leaders of the still legal PSP may have entertained hope that some form of collaboration might again be arranged between them and their former protector. Most of the leadership, however, recognized from the beginning that, given the changed world situation and the Cold War, all such hopes were illusory. Only a few lesser Communist figures (a minor PSP leader in Camaguey by the name of Sotolongo, three middle-level functionaries named Galán, Chirino, and Alonso, and two lawyers, Perez Lamy and Arsenio Gonzalez,

who played inconsequential roles in the party) went over to Batista.⁶⁹

By and large, the PSP accepted the situation following the coup calmly. On May 23, 1952, Blas Roca wrote in *Hoy* that it was becoming increasingly clear “that the new government . . . does not differ in character from the Prio government,” under which the Communists, though no longer able to operate as freely as in the past, had suffered no real persecution. Already in early April, however, diplomatic relations between Cuba and the Soviet Union had been broken off by Moscow over a minor diplomatic incident,⁷⁰ and the Batista regime’s attitude towards the local Communists began to stiffen perceptibly. The stiffening process began with the establishment of a special police section (BRAC) charged with combatting Communist activity and eventually culminated in the official proscription of the PSP in late October 1953.⁷¹ Police action against the Communists was relatively mild, however, by comparison with the campaign of suppression later waged against the terroristic anti-Batista groups of students and bourgeois intellectuals. Few Communists were subjected to the imprisonment and torture commonly meted out to young people accused of being connected with these groups, and some of the most prominent PSP leaders, including Juan Marinello and Carlos Rafael Rodriguez, went on living virtually unmolested in the Cuban capital. Even the party’s information organs, though now illegal, continued to circulate without too much difficulty, despite a measure of official interference.

The relative mildness of the government’s anti-Communist measures can readily be explained. For one thing, the workers, upon whom the Communists mainly depended for support, took a passive attitude towards the Batista regime, partly because their economic situation had improved, and partly because the regime appeared ready to pursue a course of social reform. Another reason was that the Communists, in keeping with their own past tradition, rejected any form of terrorism and kept on propagandizing for a “united front” of all democratic forces and mass action, both of which were practically impossible in view of the enduring antagonism between the Communists and the “democratic” elements that were

⁶⁹ There is no evidence whatever to support the theory that these defections were part of a new technique adopted by the Cuban party to permit underground Communist collaboration with the Batista regime.

⁷⁰ The incident arose when a Cuban security officer attempted to search the luggage of two Soviet official couriers arriving in Cuba. The Soviet government charged a violation of diplomatic immunity. See Hart, *op. cit.*, p. 263.

⁷¹ Jürgen Hell gives November 2, 1963, as the date when the party was outlawed (*op. cit.*, p. 305), without any attempt to reconcile the lateness of the government’s action with his distorted description of the Batista regime as having been from the first an “openly terroristic dictatorship of the sugar bourgeoisie” (p. 298).

pushed aside by Batista and provided most of the recruits for the terrorist groups. Ever since 1947, the Communists had done their utmost to picture the successive *Autentico* governments preceding Batista's return to power as "anti-democratic" dictatorships.

Interestingly enough, this was exactly the opposite of the picture drawn by Fidel Castro when he was tried on October 16, 1953, following his first, unsuccessful putsch against the Batista regime. In his defense plea before the court, as published ten years later (probably in a specially-edited version), he stated:

I shall tell you a story. Once upon a time there was a republic. It had a constitution, laws, freedoms, its president, its parliament, its courts. Everyone was able to meet freely with others, to discuss and to write freely. The people were dissatisfied with the government, but they had the authority to replace it with another, and in fact only a few days remained before this would have happened. Public opinion was respected. . . . There were political parties, debates on the radio, polemics on television, and mass meetings. The people believed that the past would never return. They were absolutely confident that no one would ever commit the crime of attacking their democratic institutions. Poor people! One morning they awoke with a shock. During the night, ghosts of the past had conspired and seized power. It was no bad dream, it was grim reality. A man named Fulgencio Batista had committed the horrible crime that no one expected.⁷²

On the other hand, the unsympathetic light in which the Cuban Communists viewed Castro's attack on the Moncada Barracks was made plain by a declaration of the party leadership published in August 1953 in the CPUSA organ *Daily Worker*. It stated unequivocally: "We condemn the putschist methods—characteristic of bourgeois groups—which were evident in the adventurist attempt to capture the barracks at Santiago. The heroism displayed by the participants was misdirected and sterile."⁷³ Nor did this attitude show any change over the next several years. On February 28, 1957, nearly three months after Castro and 26 followers landed by boat from Mexico on the coast of Cuba's Oriente Province to launch their new drive against Batista, the Communist leadership addressed a letter to Castro's "July 26 Movement." As later published in the illegally-circulated Communist weekly *Carta Semanal* of June 27, 1957, it read:

Our party has already informed you and Fidel Castro . . . that we definitively reject the tactics and plans you have developed. We told you in all frankness at that time that the correct course is not the course of isolated actions and expeditions, which is not appropriate to

existing subjective and objective conditions, and that we condemn actions by individuals or small groups undertaken without the collaboration of the masses. . . . We further stated that the correct approach . . . lies in the unity and common action of all opposition forces . . . in a struggle to eliminate tyranny and achieve the victory of democratic forces.

Going on to specifically condemn Castro's guerrillas for resorting to terrorist tactics, the burning of sugar-cane fields, and other forms of sabotage, the letter declared:

In general, individual acts of terror merely provide the tyranny with new pretexts for its crimes. . . . The workers and people cannot be drawn into the struggle by terroristic acts, and even less can be accomplished by threats and sabotage against enterprises.

By about February 1958, following considerable internal debate, the Communist leadership appears to have reached an initial decision to try to come to some sort of understanding with Castro.⁷⁴ But even after that, the PSP remained firmly committed to its basic positions, as evidenced by a lengthy article written by Carlos Rafael Rodriguez and published in the French Communist weekly *France Nouvelle* (July 17–23, 1958). Setting out to clarify the party's policy and strategy, particularly in relation to those of Castro's revolutionary movement, Rodriguez asserted that the PSP was far more radical in its demands for structural reform than Castro and what he termed "the left wing" of the July 26 Movement. These demands, he said, included "the immediate nationalization of foreign-controlled public-service enterprises" and an agrarian reform "which would abolish large landholdings and distribute the land free to the poor peasants and farm workers." As for the proper strategy to employ in the struggle to overthrow the Batista regime, Rodriguez argued that the situation was not yet ripe for an attempt at "the direct replacement of Batista by a government of national liberation" because

the tyrant can rely on the support of imperialism, still controls the armed forces . . . and has the support of the big sugar producers and import traders. . . . To overthrow Batista, it is necessary to form a coalition reaching beyond the ranks of the anti-imperialists to include forces which are not committed to anti-imperialism. . . . Therefore, the present strategy of the PSP is based on the necessity of achieving the unity of all political parties and groups that are opposed to the government. . . . This unity must be such as to enable

⁷² Fidel Castro, *La Historia me absolvera*, Havana, 1963, pp. 103–04.

⁷³ *Daily Worker* (New York), Aug. 5, 1953, as quoted by Theodore Draper, *Castroism*, New York, 1965, p. 26.

⁷⁴ The development of relations between Castro and the Communists has been briefly but very accurately traced by Theodore Draper in his book *Castroism*, *op. cit.*, pp. 26 ff.

men like Prio Socarras and Grau San Martin to take part in the coalition.

Rodriguez' article clearly showed that the old popular-front concept was still as deeply ingrained in the minds of the Communist leaders as their habitual rejection of all "putschist adventurism." But this poses the question of how the Communists could expect to achieve a popular front when their collaboration was rejected by all anti-Batista forces. This question is all the more relevant because all the other anti-Batista groups and parties were far more sympathetic to Castro than they were to the leaders of the PSP. (It may be mentioned here that part of the money used by Castro to buy the yacht *Granma*, which carried him and his fellow revolutionaries from Mexico to Cuba, was contributed by Prio Socarras.)

Finally, in November 1958, less than four months before Batista's fall, Rodriguez went to the *Sierra Maestra* and concluded an agreement with Castro on behalf of the PSP. By that time, individual Communists and small groups of PSP members were already fighting here and there in the ranks of Castro's revolutionary movement. In that same month, however, the PSP sent a letter under the signature of Blas Roca and Juan Marinello to the Eleventh Congress of the Communist Party of Chile. It read in part:

The tyranny has shown itself incapable of breaking the resistance and struggle of the masses [sic!]. Yet it

would be a mistake to conclude that this in itself signifies the possibility of an immediate defeat [of the tyranny] since it draws its principal strength from the disunity of the opposition forces. Hence our efforts to achieve a national unity which will put an end to the tyranny and bring to power a democratic coalition government as the first step toward a united-front government of national liberation."⁷⁵

No wonder, then, that Che Guevara made the following statement to a group of Latin American visitors several years later:

In Cuba, the Communist Party did not lead the revolution. It was unable to discern the correct methods of struggle and erred in its estimation of the chances of success. This extremely serious mistake was not fatal here, because we had Fidel and a group of real revolutionaries. In other countries, however, such a mistake might prove very costly and cause the revolution to go astray.⁷⁶

There is a certain element of irony in the fact that Guevara's remarks were reported in the same newspaper which for so many years had been the central organ of the Cuban Communists.

⁷⁵ Communist Party of Chile, *Documentos del XI Congreso Nacional realizado en Noviembre de 1958*. Santiago, 1959, p. 29.

⁷⁶ *Hoy*, Aug. 24, 1963.